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AUTHOR Reddick, Thomas L.; Peach, Larry
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ABSTRACT

Child abuse, ranging from neglect to sexual abuse and murder, is a serious problem in contemporary America. Abuse may be defined as any force that compromises a child's capacity to achieve his physical and psychological potential. This study sought to determine the personal incidences of child abuse experienced by high school seniors in public high schools in a mainly rural region of middle Tennessee. The study also investigated the effects of child abuse upon the lives and behavior of its victims. Subjects (N=275) were 18-year-olds who responded to a 15-item questionnaire requesting information on their life experiences. Approximately 28 percent of the participants reported having experienced abuse, with the greatest percentage reporting abuse from birth through 5 years of age. The most common forms of neglect were lack of emotional support and failure to provide adequate affection. The most common form of physical abuse was being slapped or punched; the most common form of psychological abuse was verbal attack. Sexual abuse was reported by 10 percent of subjects. Caring adults should devise strategies to decrease the incidences of child abuse and proper treatment should be provided to those in need. (ABL)

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STUDENTS' RESPONSES CONCERNING PERSONAL INCIDENCES OF CHILD ABUSE IN AN ELEVEN COUNTY AREA OF MIDDLE TENNESSEE

By

Thomas L. Reddick, Ph.D.
Professor of Administration and Supervision
Tennessee Techological University
Cookeville, Tennessee 38505

and

Larry Peach, Ed.D.
Associate Professor of Administration and Supervision
Tennessee Technological University
Cookeville, Tennessee 38505

at

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STUDENTS' RESPONSES CONCERNING PERSONAL INCIDENCES OF CHILD ABUSE IN AN ELEVEN-COUNTY AREA OF MIDDLE TENNESSEE

Introduction

Child abuse is a continuing, serious, problem in contemporary America. It is an extremely complex phenomenon ranging from neglect to sexual abuse and murder. Abuse may be defined as any force that compromises a child's capacity to achieve his physical and psychological potential. (Oates, 1986, p. 45.)

The phenomenon of child abuse occurs every minute of every day throughout the United States. It is much more common than many diseases; however, there is at best only parsimonious fiscal support of efforts to prevent, control or treat those affected.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the personal incidences of child abuse experienced by seniors in public high schools in a mainly rural region of Middle Tennessee. In addition, the study was designed to investigate the effects of child abuse upon the lives and behavior of its victims.

Research Design

A fifteen-item questionnaire was developed and administered to 275 high school seniors in an eleven-county area in rural Middle Tennessee. Each participating high school principal randomly selected 25 students in his or her school for the study. The students were seniors and 18 years of age.

Selected Review of Literature

Child abuse is an increasingly serious problem in our country. The U.S. Department of Justice reports that child abuse has increased three fold within the past three years. In Tennessee alone, approximately 700 cases are reported each month. (Tennessee Department of Human Services, Nashville, 1989) The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimates that more than two million cases of child abuse are reported each year. (Knudsen, 1988, p.41)

Child abuse is often defined as physical or mental injury, sexual abuse, or negligence of a child under 18 years of age. The causes for child abuse may be divided into the following categories: parental factors, child factors, and ecological factors. (Meier, 1985, p. 4)

It is interesting to note that some three-fourths of reported child abuse cases result from the actions of one or both parents. (Ibid., p.5) Approximately 70 percent of the

abuses were perpetrated by the biological mothers of the victimized children. (Ibid.) The manner in which the parents were treated in their childhood may be more significant than education, family structures, socioeconomic status, race, or other such factors. Some 30 to 50 percent of abusing parents admitted to having been abused during their childhoods. (Oates, 1986, p. 45)

The sexual victimization of children is the most feared and frightening form of child abuse. Susanne Sgroi, M.D., identified five phases of behavior in sexual child abuse situations: The Engagement Phase, The Sexual Interaction Phase, The Secrecy Phase, The Disclosure Phase, and The Suppression Phase. (Sgroi, 1983, n.p.) Judith Cooney identifies 12 myths which have evolved concerning child abuse:

(1) MYTH: The sexual abuser is usually a stranger to his or her victim.
FACT: Eighty percent of the time the abuser is a person known and trusted by his or her victim.
(2) MYTH: If the sexual abuser is the father of the victim he is actually a stepparent.
FACT: The natural father is more likely to be the abuser than a stepfather.
(3) MYTH: Some children are naturally seductive and encourage adult sexual attention.
FACT: The victim is never at fault in sexual abuse situations.
(4) MYTH: A parent would have to be drunk, on drugs, or crazy, to molest his or her own son or daughter.
FACT: The victimizing parent is usually considered to be a model citizen.
(5) MYTH: Sexual abuse is a twentieth century phenomenon.
FACT: The sexual abuse of children has been a part of all recorded history.

(6) MYTH: Sexual abuse is rare.
FACT: One of every four girls and one of every seven boys will be sexually victimized by the age of eighteen.
(7) MYTH: Child sexual abuse is not harmful to children.
FACT: Sexual abuse of children can cause lifetime emotional problems.
(8) MYTH: Families in which there is sexual abuse are normal, happy families in every other way.
FACT: Sexual abuse is a symptom of a disturbed family.
(9) MYTH: When sexual abuse occurs in the family, it is a secret shared only by the victim and the abuser.
FACT: Sexual abuse is usually a family secret.
(10) MYTH: Sexual abuse is a response to a need for sexual gratification.
FACT: Sexual abuse is a response to a variety of needs.
(11) MYTH: Minors, particularly adolescents, make up stories of sexual abuse.
FACT: It is very unlikely that minors will lie about sexual abuse.
(12) MYTH: Sexual abuse is mainly a problem for girls.
FACT: Sexual abuse is just as real for boys as girls. (Cooney, 1987, pp 13-25)

Vincent Fontana and Douglas Besharov present some demographic profiles of abused children, abusive parents, and family dynamics. (Fontana and Besharov, p. 32) They state that the average age of an abused child is under four years. The average death rate from abuse is as much as five percent. The average duration of exposure to abuse is one to three years, and the sex of the child is not a factor.

Abusive parents are married and are usually living together when the abuse occurred. The average age of the abusive mother is 26, while that of the abusive father is 30. The mother commits serious abusive acts more often than

the father, and the most common instrument of abuse is a hairbrush.

Family dynamics include the fact that 30 to 60 percent of the abusing parents were abused as children, a high proportion of abused children were conceived before their parents' marriages, the parents tend to be socially isolated, and financial difficulties are prevalent.

The home is the most prevalent place where child abuse takes place. Abusive acts are most likely to inflicted by a parent, in the home, because of the victims behavior. (Justice and Justice, 1976, p. 101)

In the Upper Cumberland region of Middle Tennessee, the focus of this study, there were 259 cases of physical abuse reported in 1988. There were 31 cases of emotional child abuse. Neglect was indicated in 380 cases. (Tennessee Department of Human Services, interview, 1989)

Every state has a law that requires the reporting of suspected or actual child abuse. Because school personnel are in such direct contact with children, local school boards should encourage them to combat child abuse and neglect. (Peach and Reddick, 1980, p. 13)

Analysis of Data

The results of the study are reported below:

The questionnaire items are presented below accompanied by an annotation concerning the findings. Participants in the study were instructed to respond to questionnaire items based on their life experiences up to their eighteenth birthdays. The respondents were assured that all information provided would be unidentifiable personally.

1. I experienced abuse as a child?

Yes	Percent	No	Percent	Total	Percent
78	28	197	72	275	100

Nearly three-fourths of the participants in the study stated that they had not experienced abuse as a child; however, 78 or 28 percent, report being abused. Therefore, some one in four eighteen-year-old high school seniors, said he or she was abused.

2. Identify the age group which shows the period in which you were abused (or most abused).

Number	
34	Birth through 5 years of age
21	6 through 13 years of age
23	14 through 17 years of age

Respondents reporting abuse affirmed the period in which they experience abuse (or most abuse) was from birth to five years of age (34 percent). Some 21 percent chose the 6-13 years of age bracket for when they were abused, and 23 percent checked the 14-17 years of age category.

3. I feel that I was negelected by my parents or guardian.

Yes	Percent	No	Percent
31	40	47	60

Forty percent of the high school seniors admitting abuse felt neglect from parents or guardians. Sixty percent did state that they were neglected by others. Those reporting neglect constituted 11 percent of the sample group of 275.

4. If yes to questionnaire item three, identify the form of neglect.

8	Did not receive needed medical attention
23	Failed to recieve adequate affection
6	Did not receive proper food
13	Lacked necessary clothing
27	Lacked emotional support in my family
19	Received little encouragement to succeed in school

Thirty-one study participants reported being neglected as minors. The most common form of neglect was "lack of emotional support in your family." In second place was failure to receive adequate affection, then little encouragement to stay in school, inadequate clothing, improper medical attention, and the improvision of proper food.

5. I feel that I have experienced physical abuse.

Yes	Percent	No	Percent
21	27	57	73

Some 23 (or 29 percent) of those admitting abuse in the study felt that they had been physically abused as children. The percentage declines to eight percent of the 275 students in the entire sample group.

6. If yes to questionnaire item five, how were you physically abused? Please identify the form.

Number	
10	Beaten or whipped
1	Tied up or restrained
14	Slapped or punched
2	Burned, scalded or shocked
6	Shaken excessively
2	Other (two reported being choked)

The most common form of physical abuse from those so abused was being slapped or punched. The next most prevalent form was having been beaten or whipped followed by excessive shaking

7. Check the following types of injuries received from your physical abuse.

Number	
2	Burns
6	Internal injuries
13	Bruises
9	Lacerations
4	Fractures
3	Other (one reported scalding and two said their mouths were washed out)

The most prevalent injury resulting from physical abuse was "bruises and abrasions". The next highest in number category was "lacerations and cuts", followed by "internal injuries", fractures, burns, and "other" (one scalded and two reported mouths washed out).

8. I feel that I have experienced psychological abuse.

Yes	Percent	No	Percent
23	29	55	71

Twenty-three respondents in the study (29 percent of those abused) reported having been abused psychologically. The percentage of psychological child abuse based on the sample reduced to eight percent.

9. If yes to number eight, how were you psychologically abused?

Number	
19	Verbal attacks
15	Lack of affection
11	Considered worthless
8	Unwanted child
3	Other (no responses reported)

The most frequently selected category of psychological abuse was verbal attacks. Other responses in descending order of frequency were "lack of affection", "considered worthless," "unwanted child," and "other" (no responses listed).

10. I feel that I have experienced sexual abuse.

Yes	Percent	No	Percent
8	10	70	90

Eight students responded that they had been abused sexually. Those reporting sexual abuse composed about three percent of the total sample.

11. If yes to number ten, who was the sexual abuser?

Number	
1	Stranger (a man reported)
4	Immediate family member (reported: three cases father, one case mother)
3	Acquaintance (reported: one case an uncle, one case a female cousin, one case a close family friend)

The known abusers in the eight sexual abuse situations were: the father in three cases, the mother, an uncle, and a female cousin in one case each. A stranger was reported to be responsible in two cases. In both of those cases the abuser was a man.

12. Did you report the sexual abuse to anyone?

Yes	Percent	No	Percent
2	38	6	62

Six of the eight children sexually abused did not report the abuse to anyone.

13. If yes to number twelve, to whom did you report the abuse?

Number	
1	Teacher
1	Parent

Two of the sexually abused children did report their abuse. One talked to a parent and the other to a teacher.

14. Are you now receiving (or have you ever received) counseling or special help for any type of child abuse? If so, from whom did you get help?

Yes	Percent	No	Percent
8	03	70	97

Number	Source of Help
1	Mental Health Center
1	School Counselor
2	Minister
4	Physician
0	Other

Only eight (three percent) of the abused children had ever received counseling or special help to aid them in coping with the effects of their abuse. Four of the students stated they were counseled or aided by a physician, two by a minister, one by a school counselor, and one by personnel at a mental health center.

15. Should special counseling services be available to children who have been abused?

Yes	Percent	No	Percent
73	94	5	06

Some 94 percent (73) of the abused children stated that special counseling services should be available to children who have been abused.

Postscript

Approximately one in every four participants in this study reported experiencing child abuse. The victims of child abuse often have no way to resist their abusers. Caring adults should devise strategies to decrease the incidences of child abuse, and proper treatment should be provided to those in need.

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